Inclusive Language Playbook: **Writing for LGBTQ+ Communities**

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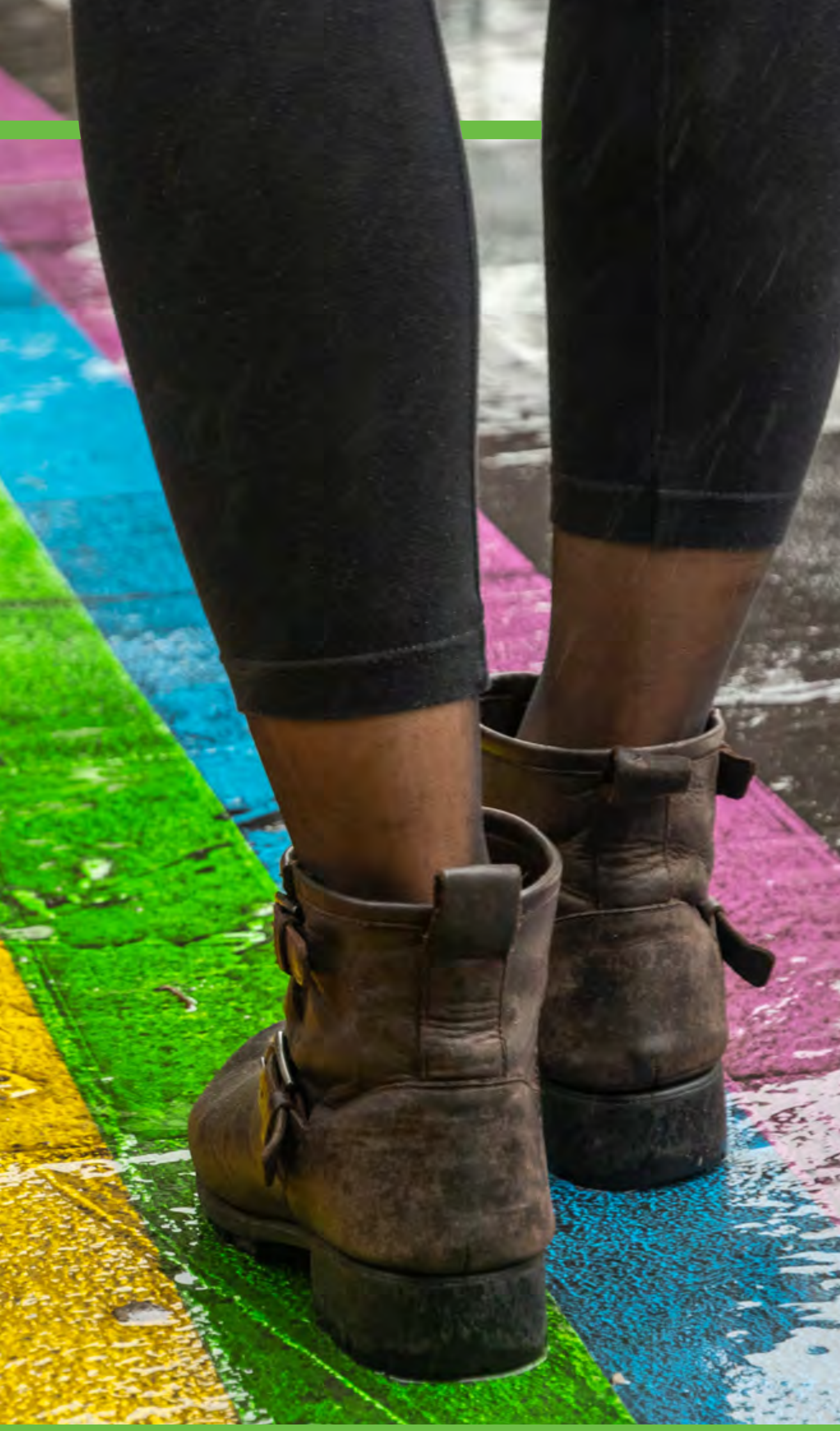
Introduction

CommunicateHealth (CH) is proud to be a company with LGBTQ+ leaders, and we strive to create health communication products that make **everyone** feel seen, included, and respected. The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us that building trust is a critical part of our role as health communicators. We have an opportunity to build trust with LGBTQ+ readers by choosing **inclusive language**: language that reflects our audiences' diverse identities and experiences.

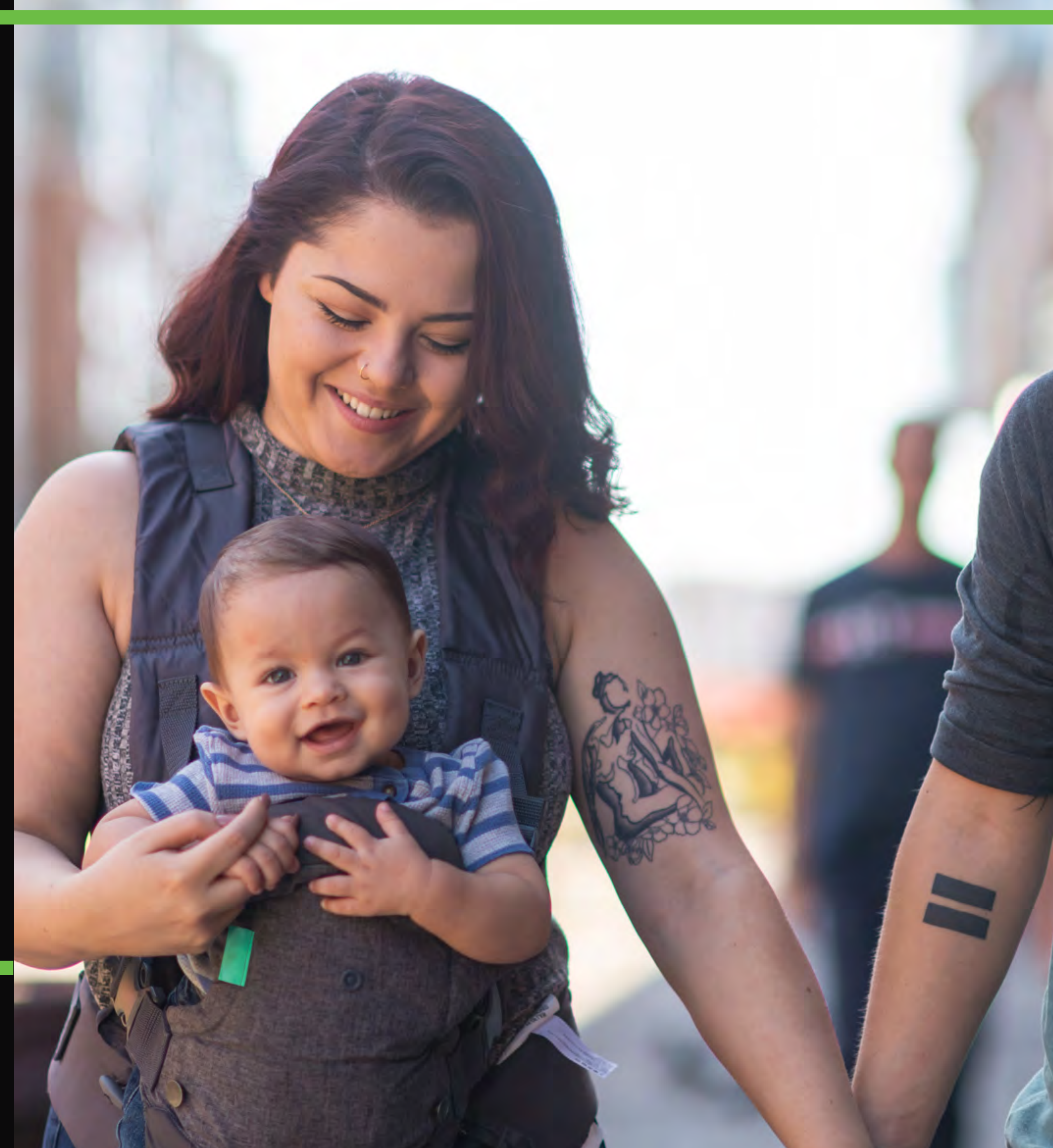
Over the past few years, we've started to see more authentic LGBTQ+ representation in the media, paving the way for more LGBTQ+ people to live openly and share their experiences. Meanwhile, social media has offered new ways for people to learn about gender and sexuality, understand their own identity, and find community. Unfortunately, we've also seen an increase in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and acts of violence. All of this means that cultural conversations happen quickly these days, and **the language we use to describe LGBTQ+ people and identities is constantly evolving**.

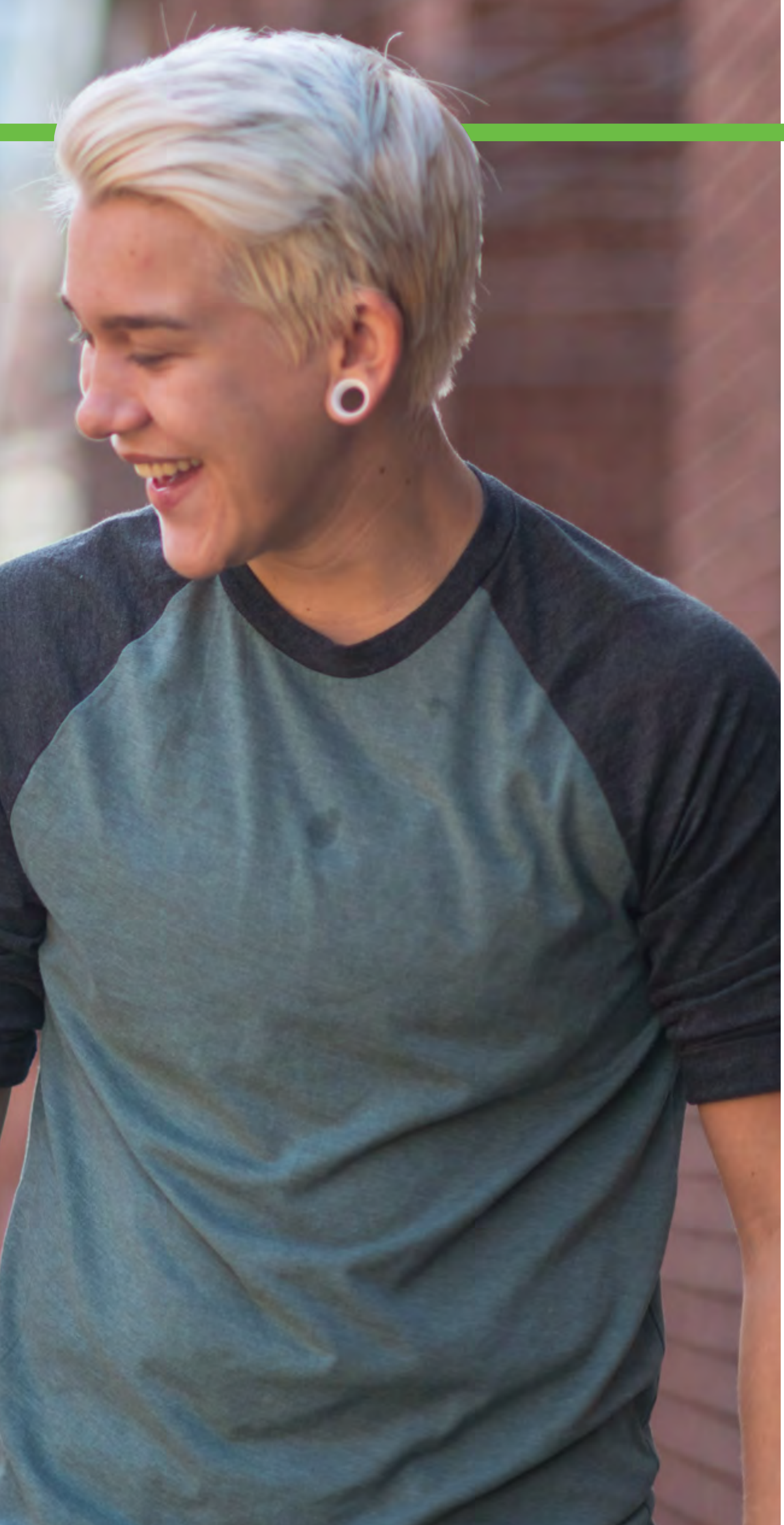


At CH, we believe inclusive communication starts with acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. So we've created this playbook as a starting point to give you some best practices and ideas to consider as you work toward developing inclusive materials. Because LGBTQ+ communities include a diverse range of genders and sexualities, among other identities, there's no one-size-fits-all approach to writing about LGBTQ+ people. But there are some terms that most people agree it's best to avoid. A running theme that you'll notice right away is our recommendation to **discuss language in communication materials and to test those materials with your priority audiences** whenever possible. This helps us write messaging that's inclusive, representative, and effective.

We learned from a variety of formal and informal resources as we developed this guide. For example, we've sourced content from social media sites to account for voices that may not be reflected in mainstream media. You can find sources linked throughout the resource and listed at the end of the playbook.

Unpacking LGBTQ+





LGBT vs. LGBTQ+

First, you're probably wondering how to refer to this audience as a general group. This is a discussion you'll want to have with your project team. In general, **we recommend using LGBTQ+ as a standard term**.

You may be familiar with LGBT as a more traditional acronym, but many LGBTQ+ people have moved away from this because it excludes many people who live within the diverse spectrum of gender and sexuality. Here's a quick breakdown of the difference between the 2:

- **LGBT:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender. Government agencies often use this terminology as this has been the most standardized within legal and "official" language. But, of course, naming only these 4 identities leaves a lot of people out.
- **LGBTQ+:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning. The "+" is for people who may identify with this acronym but don't necessarily identify with the specific identities named in it. It's certainly more inclusive than "LGBT," but using the "+" to include everyone else not specifically named still produces some degree of othering.

LGBTQ+ and its many iterations

You may notice that there's no standardized way to generally refer to LGBTQ+ communities. You also may have seen many iterations of LGBTQ+. Some include more letters to better highlight certain identities represented by the acronym, like:

- **LGBTQIA+:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual
- **LGBTQI2S:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, two-spirit

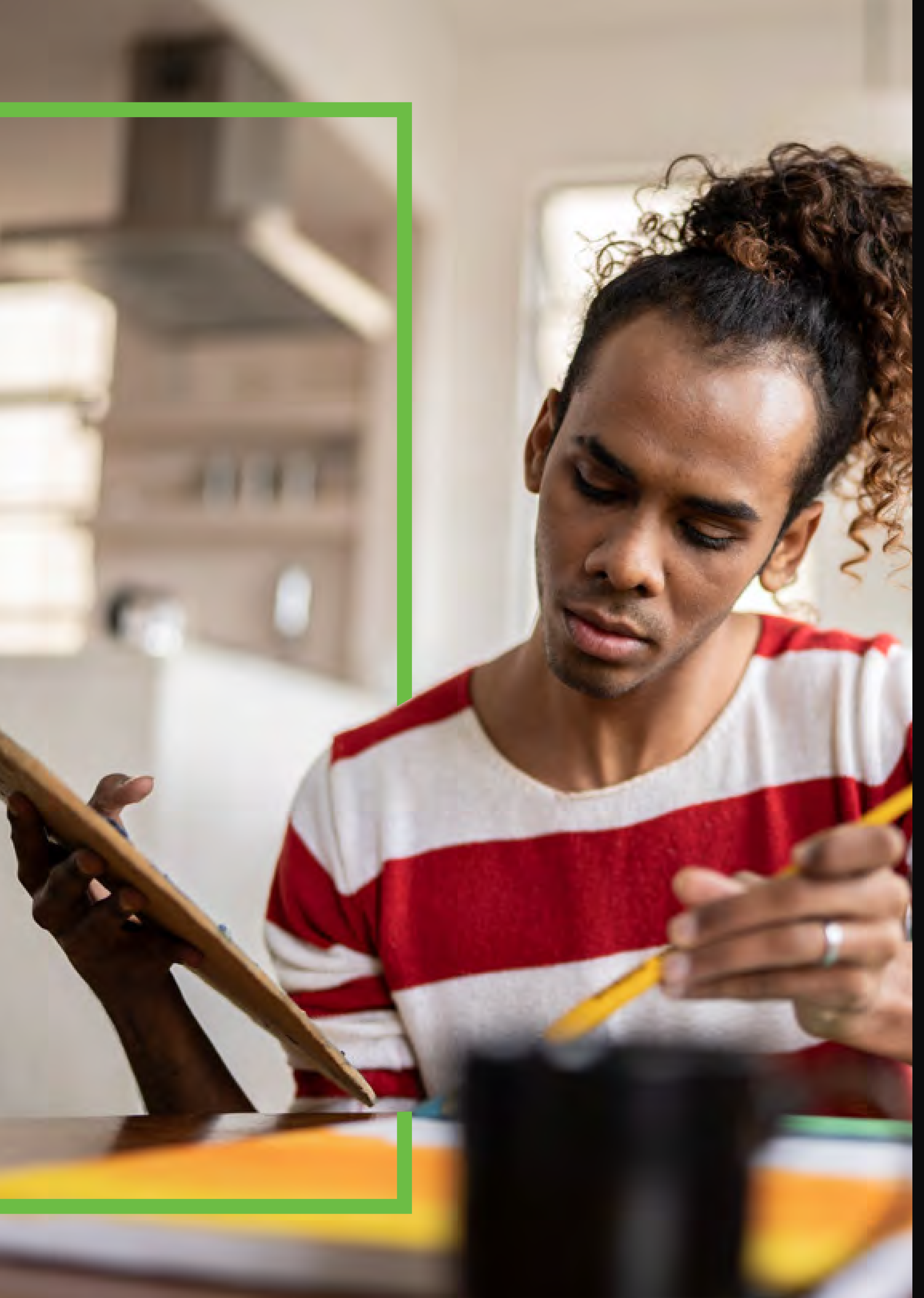
Instead of always defaulting to the same term, be thoughtful about which you choose. For example, if your priority audiences include Indigenous LGBTQ+ people in North America, consider including 2S (two-spirit) in the acronym. For other audiences, this term may not be appropriate.

Check in with your team and test terms with your audience if you can. **But note that in general, we recommend avoiding very long acronyms.** That's why our suggestion is to use LGBTQ+ — and to use other forms mainly when our audience indicates a clear preference.

Identity is… messy

If you're trying to reach LGBTQ+ people, ask yourself: **Is my audience specific enough or do I need to consider audience segmentation**? Does the health topic you're writing about apply more to one group than another? Do you need to create separate materials to reach each group? Again, LGBTQ+ people have a diverse range of identities, so you may need to narrow the scope of your materials.

Speaking of that diverse range of identities, **keep intersectionality on your radar**. As we've been discussing, LGBTQ+ people aren't monolithic in terms of sexuality — but that goes for everything else, too! There are Black gay people and trans people living with disabilities, and it's our job to consider all the unique information needs of our diverse audiences.

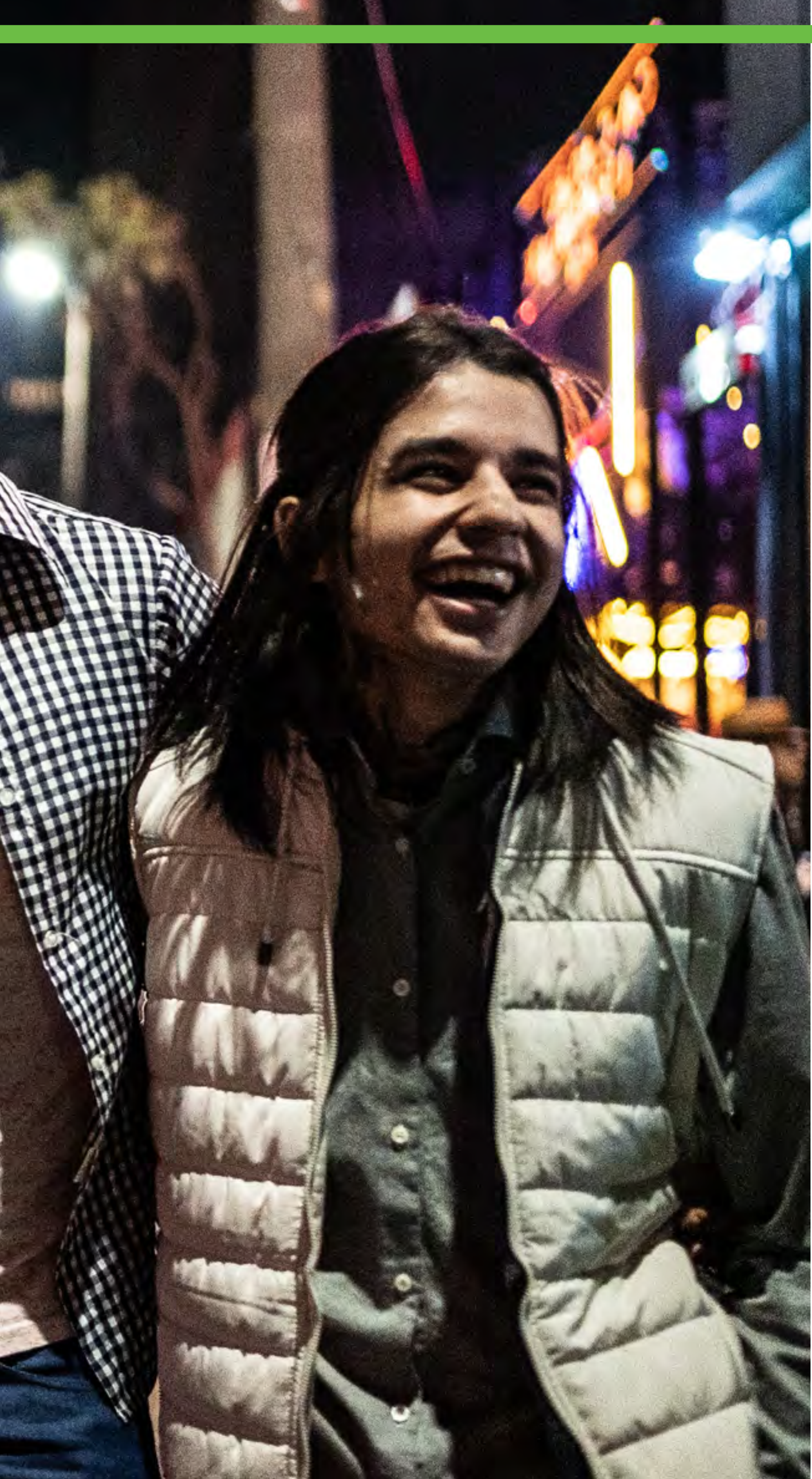


Queer

The difference between LGBT and LGBTQ+ also brings **“queer”** into the conversation. “Queer” is **a reclaimed slur popular with younger generations**, who may use it as an alternative to LGBT or LGBTQ+. Since it’s a reclaimed slur, think carefully about using it in your writing — some people may see it as offensive, while others view it as a statement of resistance to the traditional meaning of the term.

Our recommendation is to use “queer” intentionally and carefully. If we’re truly trying to connect with LGBTQ+ audiences, we want to use the language they use — and that often includes “queer.” This may feel uncomfortable and lead to some spirited conversations among your team, but respecting the language our priority audiences use is worth the effort. If you do use it, make sure to test it — as always! — with your audience.

Gender



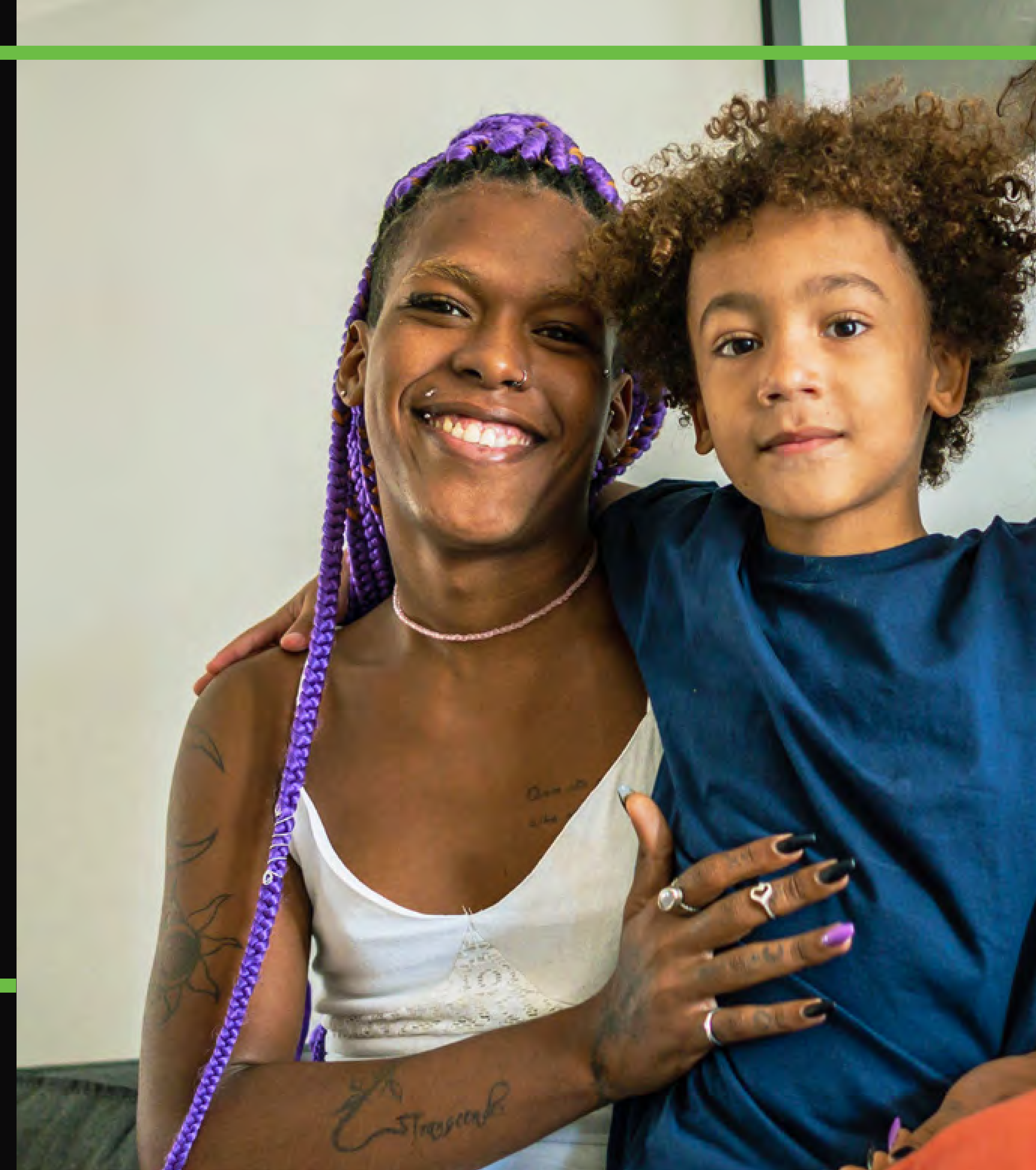
Gender (unlike sex) is a social construct, and it can heavily inform the language we use whether we're aware of it or not. It also means that gender doesn't exist in a vacuum — rather, it's influenced by social contexts, like race and class.

The way we view gender can influence our content in different ways. For example, it's common to portray doctors as men or children's caretakers as women. We also see this in our tendency to only use "he" or "she" when describing someone (more on pronouns up next).

We recommend using gender-conscious language. That means being thoughtful about using gendered language when gender is important and using gender-neutral language when it's not. This is why we almost always use "partner" (not "husband" or "wife") and "child" (not "son" or "daughter") in our materials. Other terms for this are "gender-aware," "gender-sensitive," and "gender-inclusive" language. Using this approach helps your writing honor your audiences' genders while being inclusive.

Pronouns

We use the term "pronouns" instead of "preferred pronouns." That's because referring to someone with **pronouns that respect their identity** isn't a *preference* — **it's a *necessity***.

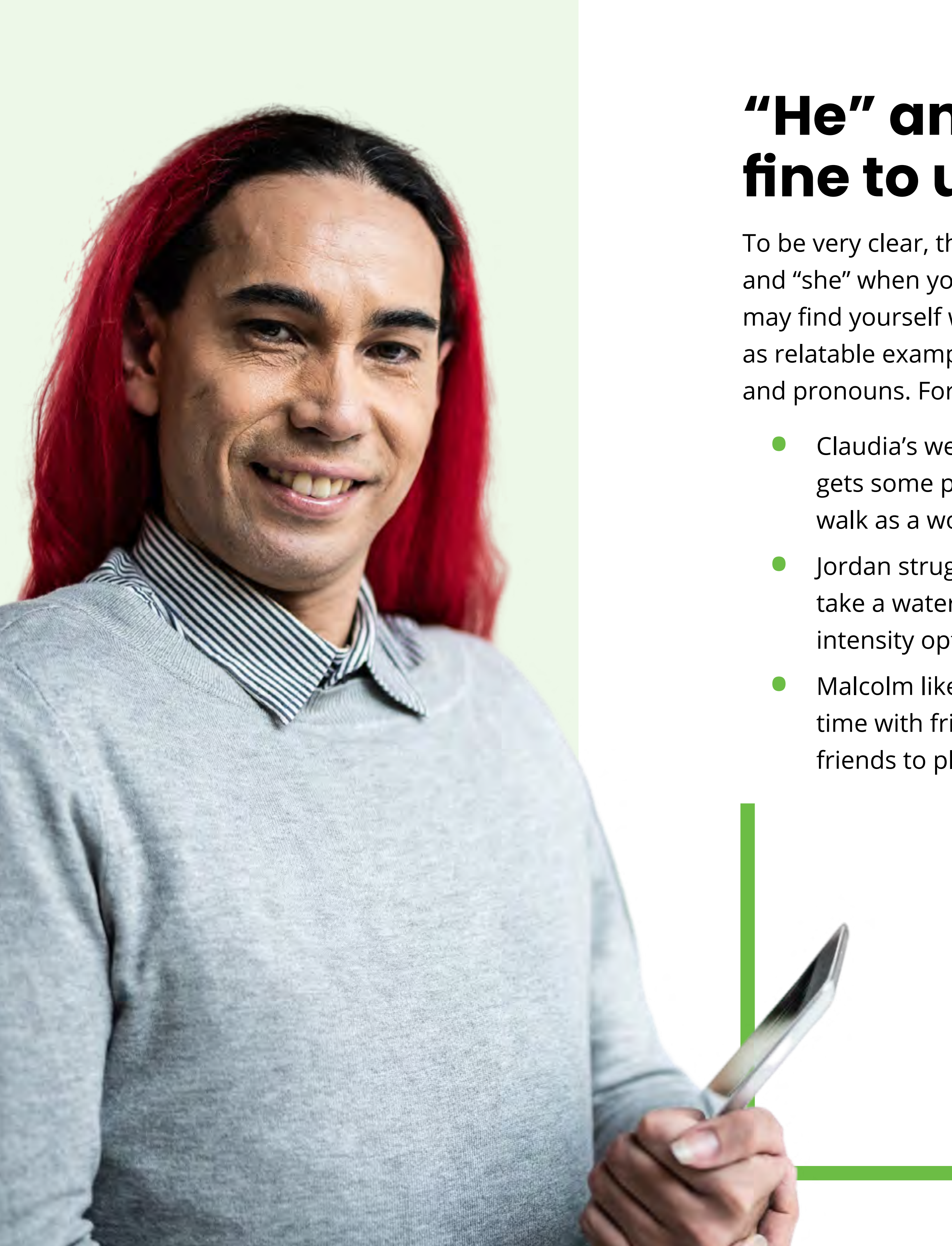


Singular "they"

Many people still assume that "he/him/his" and "she/her/hers" are the only options for singular pronouns. Or they might assume they know someone's gender identity and misgender them by using the wrong pronoun.

Our recommendation is to use gender-neutral language by using the singular "they" when writing about an unspecified person. (Note that the singular "they" is now considered grammatically correct per AP style and Merriam-Webster.) And this is usually a super simple swap:

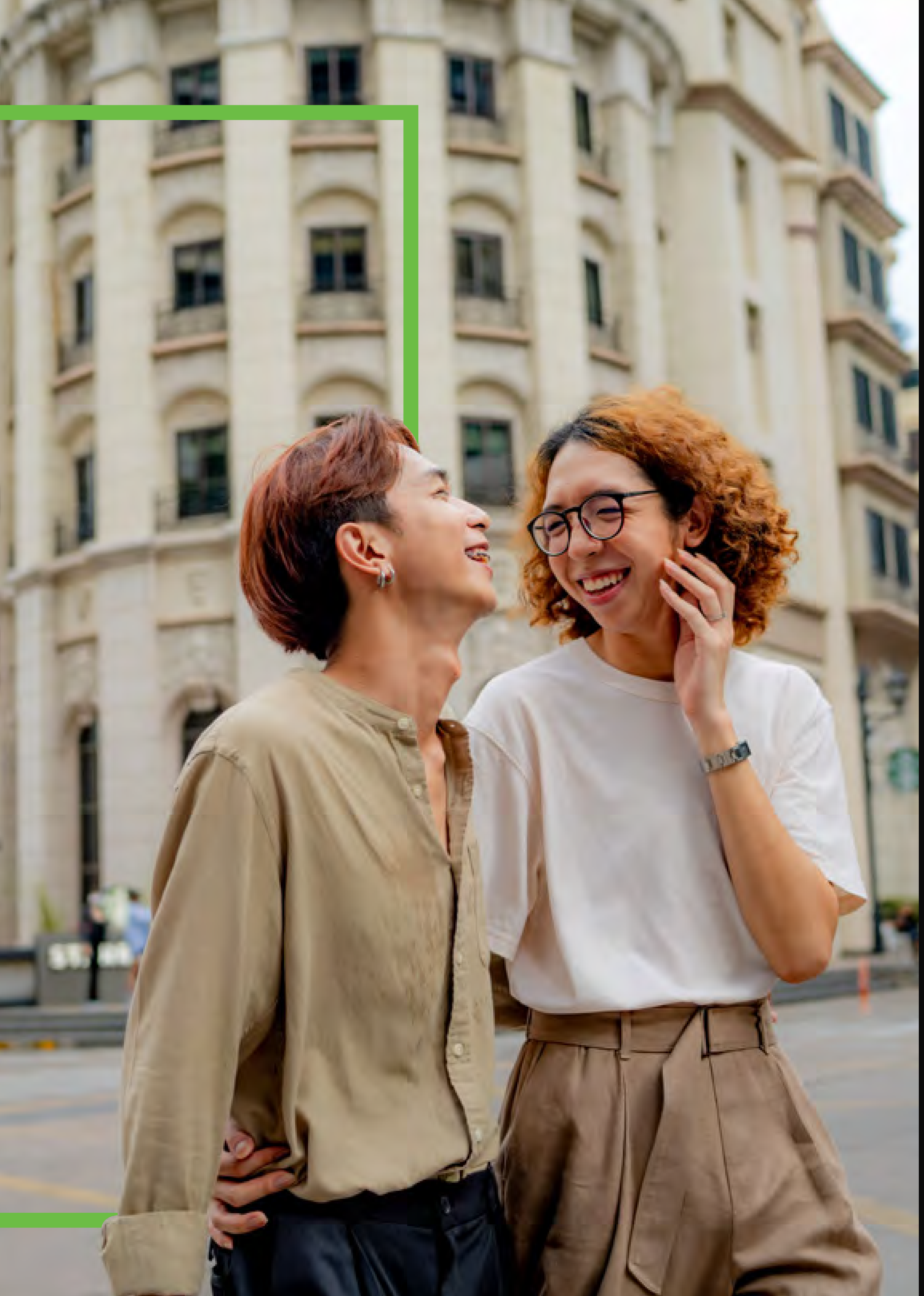
- Write: Keep communication open with your teen by asking about **their** interests.
- Instead of: Keep communication open with your teen by asking about **his or her** interests.



“He” and “she” are still fine to use!

To be very clear, there’s nothing wrong with using “he” and “she” when you know they apply. In your work, you may find yourself writing about characters (or personas!) as relatable examples. In that case, use a range of people and pronouns. For example:

- Claudia’s week is busy because of work. But she gets some physical activity in her day by going for a walk as a work break.
- Jordan struggles with intense physical activity. They take a water aerobics class because it’s a low-intensity option that works for them.
- Malcolm likes to be active but hates missing out on time with friends. He found a solution by inviting his friends to play tennis with him on the weekends.



Neopronouns

In some LGBTQ+ communities, use of neopronouns (or "new" pronouns) is common. But they can be confusing for people who haven't encountered them before. Some examples of neopronouns include:

- ze/zir/zirs
- xe/xem/xyrs
- ey/em/eirs

You probably won't find yourself using neopronouns in your health communication work very often. But it's important to be aware of their use because many trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming people use neopronouns as a way to exist outside the gender binary. Their use is more popular with younger generations.

If you think it could make sense to use neopronouns, **discuss it with your team — and try to find the opportunity to message test**! At the moment, neopronouns are often redefined or recontextualized. So it's important to **do careful research on how to use them**.

Biology and Anatomy

Traditional views of gender and sex are binary: male or female. To be more inclusive, there's a push to view sex as a spectrum — similar to sexuality and gender identity.

Sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and gender expression

It's common to see the term "sex" on forms you fill out at the doctor's office or for research. Typically, this means "sex assigned at birth." **Our recommendation is to use "sex assigned at birth"** and explain that people might also hear this referred to as "biological sex."

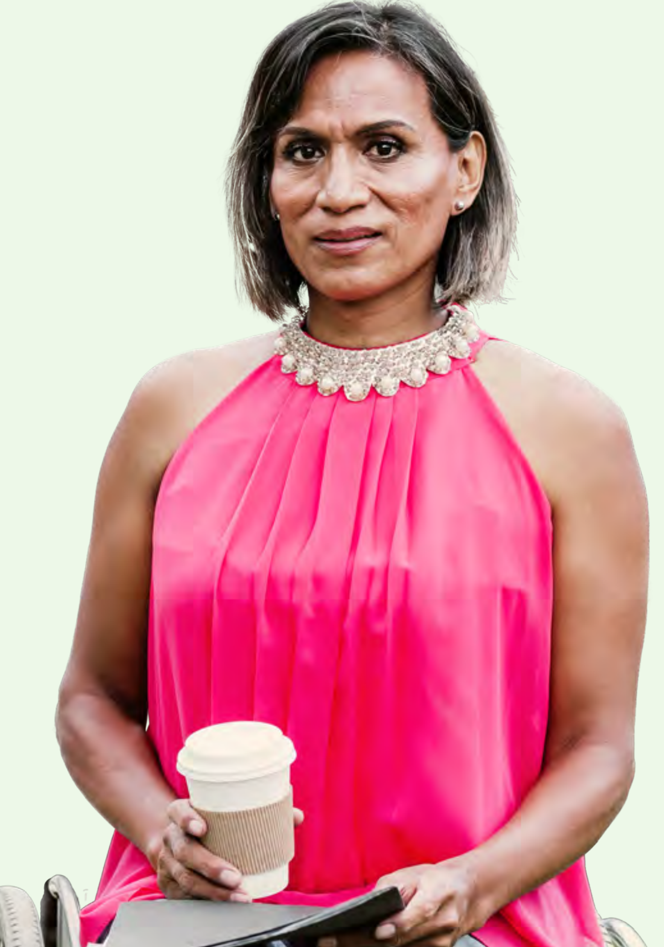
A person's sex assigned at birth can influence their gender, but it's certainly not the only factor in determining their gender identity or gender expression. In fact, sometimes it's irrelevant!

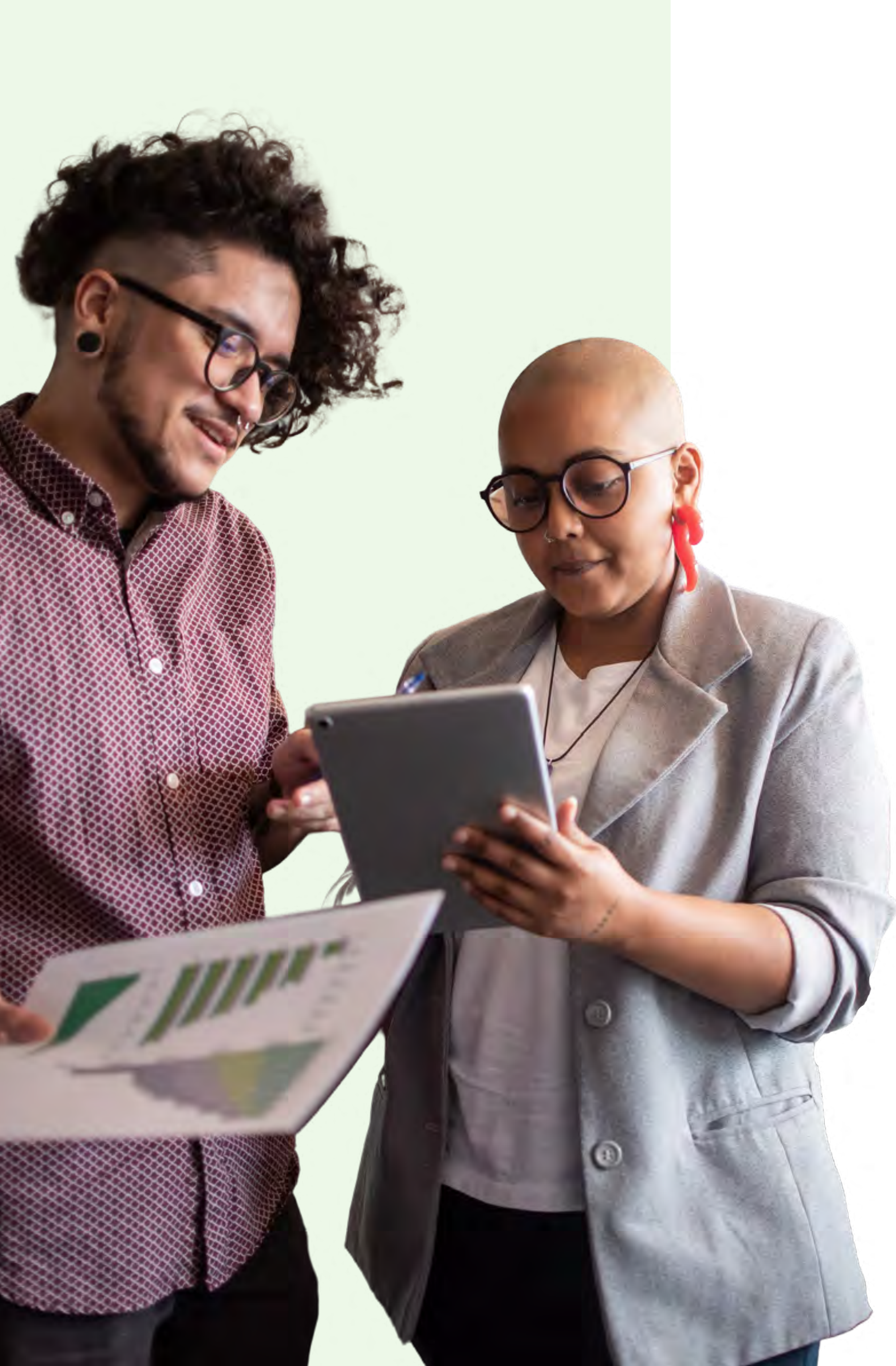
"Gender identity" is a person's internal sense of their own gender — like woman, nonbinary, man, etc. If this doesn't match their sex assigned at birth, they may consider themselves "trans" or "transgender." If it does match, they're most likely "cis" or "cisgender" — even if they don't use that label.

Gender expression is how a person presents themselves to the world — like masculine, gender fluid, feminine, and so forth. Some people may have a fixed gender expression, while others may feel like it changes over time. The genderbread person model helps break down the differences between sex assigned at birth, gender identity, and gender expression.

A note on "biological sex"

While this term can be useful for contextualizing "sex assigned at birth," the term "biological sex" is often used in anti-trans rhetoric. Depending on the context, you may want to skip it altogether.





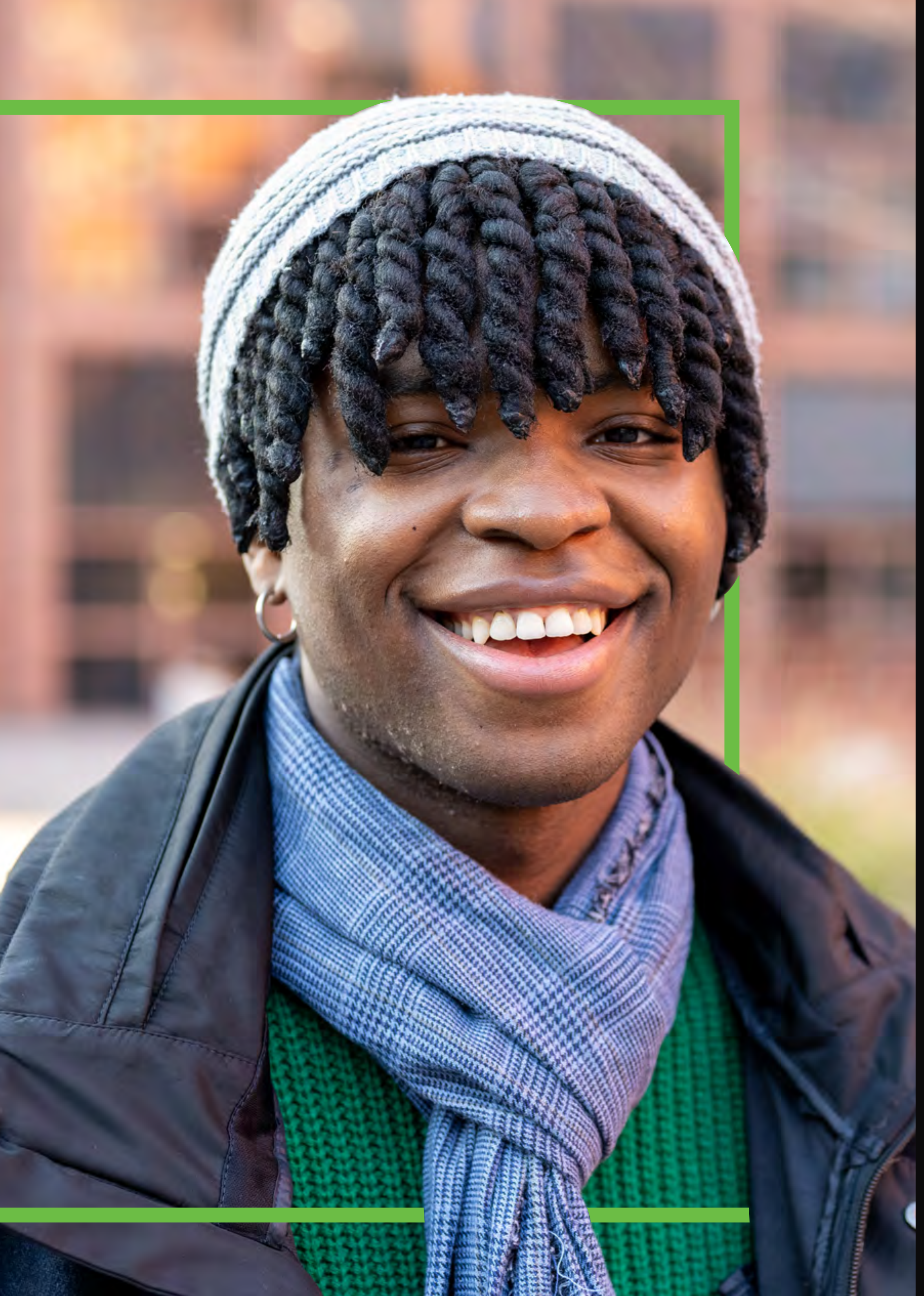
Anatomy and gendered terms

When it comes to reproductive anatomy, people tend to divide terms based on a binary and gender bodies. Some folks advocate for non-gendered terms. While that can work well in a one-on-one patient setting based on a patient's needs, it can get tricky quickly for health communicators, as we often need to align with clinical recommendations and use words like "vagina" and "penis."

(As a quick aside here, this will be an interesting communication landscape to watch. The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, for example, outlined a plan in 2021 to be more effective and respectful in communicating clinical recommendations that may involve sex and gender diversity.)

Balancing inclusive language with clarity is tricky — especially since more inclusive language may sometimes be less plain language. Still, it's our job to **help people understand less familiar terms by defining and contextualizing them**.

Finding the right balance here is very important, since gendered terms can sometimes trigger gender dysphoria. So try using (and testing!) swaps that are mindful of people who may be uncomfortable with gendered terms.



Try writing:

- Check your breasts or upper body regularly for changes.
- Men (and anyone who has a prostate) who have trouble peeing need to see a doctor.

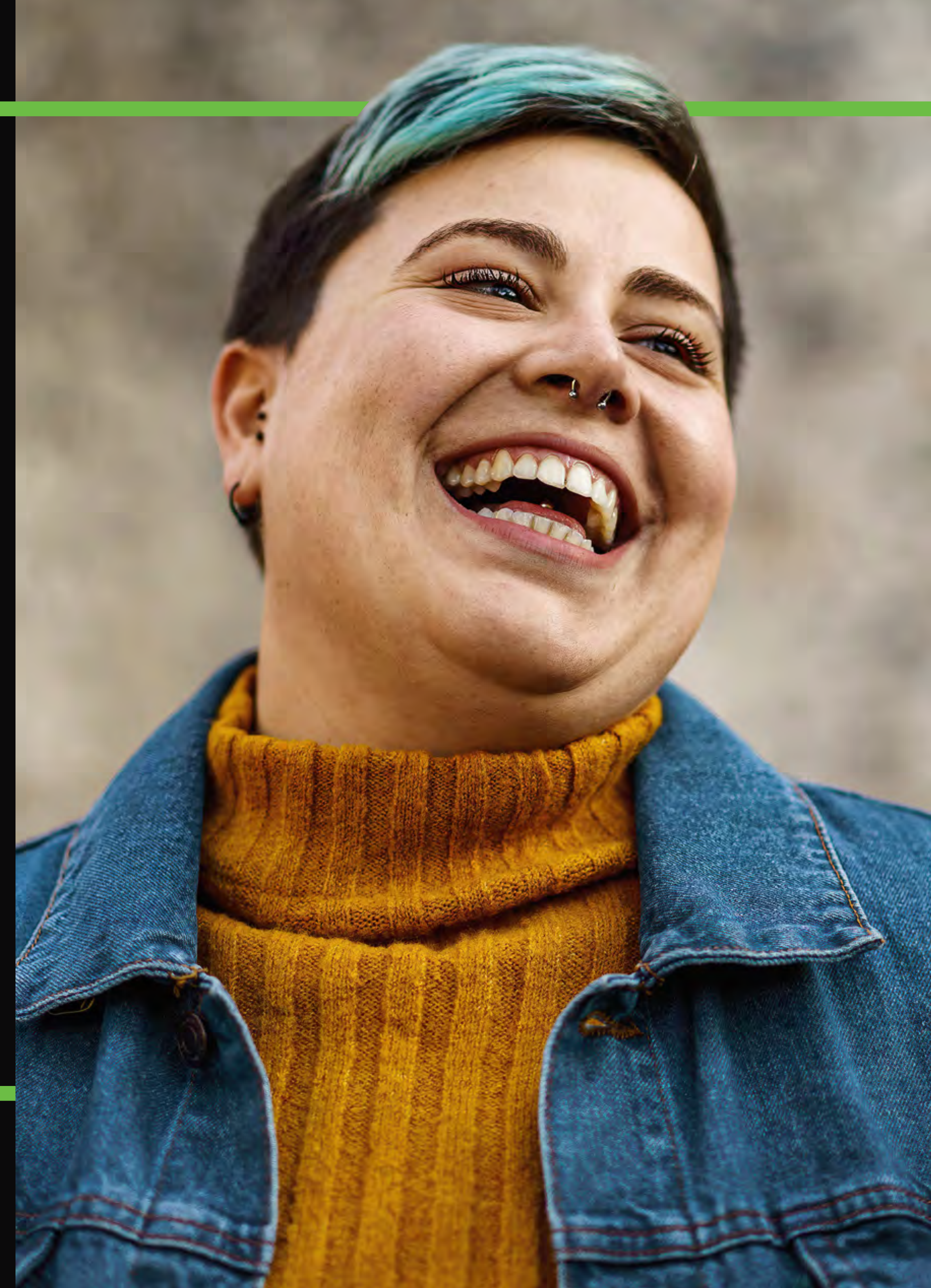
Instead of:

- Check your breasts regularly for changes.
- Men who have trouble peeing need to see a doctor.

You'll notice that these swaps acknowledge more inclusive terms while still using terms that align with clinical guidance. Finding solutions like these may take some more thinking, but it's worth it to be as inclusive as possible.

Reconsidering Common Terms

While there are many advocates for inclusivity among us, public health professionals and health communicators have still played a part in the history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. Critically looking at our history can help us use more inclusive language to champion equity. It also challenges us to look at the language we use today and identify new ways to write content.



Swapping out terms

Below is a table that lists words and phrases that are likely to come up in health communication materials. Included next to them are alternatives that can be offensive to LGBTQ+ people and are best to avoid.

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
Gender and sex		
Gender-affirming surgery	Sex assignment surgery	This swap reinforces the idea that people don't change their gender but rather *affirm* it through treatment. In general, "gender-affirming care" refers to a range of treatments — like surgery, hormone therapy, and speech therapy — that help a person feel more comfortable in their body.
Gender fluid Gender queer Nonbinary	Other gender	Specific terms like these provide options outside of the gender binary without othering people. If you're putting together materials for a survey or another research activity, it may be helpful to use "other" — with a field to write in a specific term.

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
Intersex	Intersexual An intersex Hermaphrodite People with disorders of sex development (DSD)	"Intersex" is an adjective and can be offensive if you use it as a noun. It's also important to avoid any language that implies intersex people are medically "abnormal." Keep in mind that some people with intersex traits have pushed for "DSD" to mean "differences of sex development" rather than "disorders of sex development." But since the acronym can mean either, it's probably best to avoid it.
Sex assigned at birth	Birth sex Natural sex	The "assigned" in "sex assigned at birth" is important because it indicates that someone was just given a sex. But their assigned sex may not be their actual sex — which is why terms like "natural sex" are inaccurate and often harmful.

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
Transgender Trans	Transgendered A transgender Transexual	"Transgender" is an adjective and can be offensive if used as a verb or noun. "Trans" is a shorthand way to say this term that's more commonly used within LGBTQ+ spaces. Use it like this: "He is transgender." You could also say, "He is trans" or "He is a trans man." If this person's trans identity isn't relevant to your material, you can simply call them a man.
Transitioned	Changed genders Became transgender	Use "transitioning" when someone is currently making changes to match their gender identity. Trans people may have identified as their current gender for their whole life — whether or not they made it public. Transitioning medically (e.g., taking hormones) and/or socially (e.g., changing pronouns or name) is a choice that trans people may make, but that doesn't mean they aren't their gender identity pre-transition.

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
Sexual and reproductive health		
External condom Internal condom	Male condom Female condom	Give a quick definition of what these are. For example, external condoms cover the penis and internal condoms are placed inside the vagina or anus.
Menstrual health Sexual health Reproductive health	Women's health Men's health	This depends a lot on context. Because these terms are less plain language, define them on first use.
When a person gets their period Period products	When women get their periods Feminine hygiene	There are people who menstruate who don't identify with gendered terms like "women" or "feminine." Instead, use gender-neutral language.
Pregnant person or people	Pregnant woman or women	

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
Sexuality		
Gay	A gay	Use sexuality as an adjective — like “they’re gay.” Similar to saying “a transgender,” the noun format can be derogatory and dehumanizing. Always consider whether you even need to explicitly state a person’s sexuality.
Lesbian		The term “lesbian” developed differently than “gay,” so while we don’t say “a gay,” it’s fine to use “a lesbian.”

Use this	Instead of this	Tips and notes
MSM Men who have sex with men		Think of "MSM" as describing behavior, not *identity* — we can't know how someone identifies their sexuality (e.g., gay or bisexual) from a behavior (e.g., having sex with a man). A couple additional notes: • If you do use the term, consider its history. "MSM" has historically included trans women and may be off-putting to them, even if you're using the term very intentionally. Be specific with the audience you're trying to reach. A broad category like this may make your material's main message unclear. • You may need to use "MSM" for accuracy in some cases, as organizations like CDC have used it as a classification to report data.
Sexuality Sexual orientation	Sexual preference Lifestyle	

Helpful Resources

Terminology guides, glossaries, and articles

Below you'll find more resources to support your work writing for LGBTQ+ communities:

- LGBTQ+ Glossary — PFLAG
- Pronoun Guide — GLSEN
- An Ally's Guide to Terminology — GLAAD
- Style Guide for Writing About Transgender People — Radical Copyeditor
- Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication — Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Redefining Anatomical Language in Healthcare to Create Safer Spaces for All Genders — Lens by Monash University

Social media accounts

The best way to hear about LGBTQ+ people's lived experiences and communication-related preferences is by listening to LGBTQ+ people — and social media can be a great tool for that. Here are some accounts* that we've found both educational and inspiring:

- @alokvmenon
- @blairimani
- @chasestrangio
- @dineaesthetics
- @genderfenderbender
- @ihartericka
- @mattxiv
- @mygenderation
- @pinkmantaray
- @them

**The opinions expressed on these accounts are those of the account owners and do not necessarily reflect the views of CommunicateHealth.*

Acknowledgements

As noted in the introduction, we truly believe inclusive communication starts with acknowledging that we don't have all the answers. And we certainly don't! But we do think there's value to starting the conversation in living resources like this one — and we hope you'll find the guidance useful in your work.

Speaking of which, we can't overemphasize how much we look forward to your feedback as you put this guide to work for you. Your input will be a driving factor for future iterations of the playbook, and we thank you for it in advance.

And finally, we want to say thank you to everyone who contributed to this playbook, including the CommunicateHealth LGBTQ+ Employee Resource Group. Special thanks to:

- Victor Oliva, MPH (lead writer)
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